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Faith & Values: Exhibit shows Jewish roots of Christianity

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Most people have to travel thousands of miles to see the Holy Land's sacred sites. Starting today, Emory University will bring a sampling of them to Atlanta.

Emory's Michael C. Carlos Museum is opening an exhibit that brings to the United States for the first time some of the most precious biblical artifacts ever found. Titled Cradle of Christianity: Jewish and Christian Treasures from the Holy Land, the exhibit displays portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the "Judah, son of Jesus [Yeshua]" burial box featured in the recent Discovery Channel documentary, "The Lost Tomb of Jesus."

The exhibit, which runs through Oct. 14, focuses on the common heritage of Judaism and Christianity. But it also uses the remains of excavated churches, religious furnishings and a full-scale reconstruction of a Byzantine-era church to tell the story of Christianity's rise.

Carl R. Holladay, a professor of New Testament Studies at Emory, sat on the advisory committee that helped plan the exhibit. He is about to embark on a speaking tour of local churches, synagogues and schools, where he will talk about the exhibit's significance.

Holladay recently spoke about the exhibit with the AJC. His comments were edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: Why is the Cradle of Christianity such an important exhibit?

A: The metaphor of the cradle underscores its importance. Judaism is the womb from which early Christianity was conceived and born. I think a lot of people think of Judaism and Christianity as two separate religions. They're unaware that Christianity began as a sort of reform movement [within] Judaism and eventually broke off.

Q: How close were they in the beginning?

A: It was possible in the earlier days for a person to be a Christian but also remain Jewish. Today, by contrast, you're typically either Jewish or Christian. During that earlier period, many Christians were Jews. The exhibit underscores that.

Q: What caused the two faiths to split besides the contention by some Christians that Jesus was the messiah?

A: One of the most important events in the first century was the destruction of the [Jewish] Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70. That event created a major crisis within Palestine because the Temple was the central, defining focus of Judaism. It was the place where sacrificial offerings were made, the priesthood was based, and people visited for religious festivals.

Once that building was destroyed, Judaism had to redefine itself. It had to move out of Jerusalem. Eventually, it moved into northern Palestine. That event also helped distinguish the followers of Jesus from Jews who were not Christians. According to [the historian] Josephus, when the Romans came to Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, many of the followers of Jesus fled. They wanted to show that they were not identified with the Jerusalem Temple and not responsible for the revolt that led to the destruction of the Temple. Christianity then emerged as a separate, distinct movement.

Q: What's it like for you to see these artifacts up close?

A: It's a fascinating experience for me. By seeing them up close, it connects you with this formative period of history. In the exhibit, a lot of these artifacts will be displayed openly, not behind a glass. Visitors will actually be able to view them up close. It gives people a very powerful connection to these early artifacts.

Q: Are people becoming more interested in biblical archaeology because of documentaries such as "The Lost Tomb of Jesus"?

A: I think so. They bring publicity and at least create discussion. It's important to know that some of the bone boxes that were reported in "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" documentary are part of the exhibit. There's one ossuary [bone box] with the inscription, "Jesus, son of Joseph." Another says, "Judah, son of Jesus." If people saw that documentary, they can now see the actual boxes.

Q: Are people ever threatened or angry when you talk about the exhibit with them?

A: I get a very positive reaction. People are fascinated with ancient artifacts, and they're also fascinated with the roots of early religious movements. There's a sense in which these artifacts are shared by everyone who claims to be a Christian or is Jewish.

This exhibit creates the possibility for conversation between Christian groups and among Jews and Christians which otherwise might not occur. We've scheduled several events that are intended to create dialogue among different Christian and Jewish groups to talk about what they share and how they differ. These different groups live side by side in Atlanta and in the Southeast. One of the challenges is learning to talk to each other, and we think this has the capacity to enable those conversations to occur.

Photo

JOHN SPINK / Staff

An exhibit of biblical artifacts at Emory's Michael C. Carlos Museum includes an ossuary with the inscription "Judah son of Jesus" (above) and one inscribed "Jesus, son of Joseph."